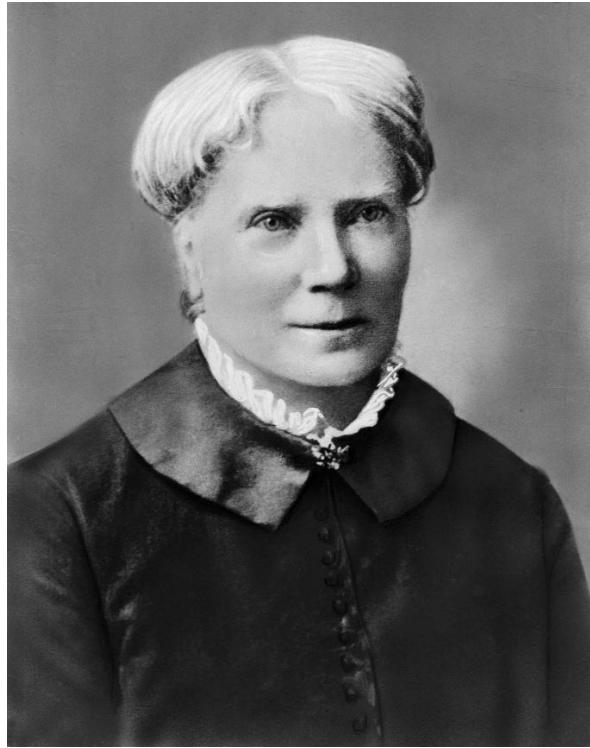


Elizabeth Blackwell (physician and abolitionist)

(February 3, 1821 - May 31, 1910)



Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell is the first woman to attend a medical school and the first woman to get a medical degree in the United States. Because of a law that recognized foreign doctors, she was included in the British medical register when she went to practice medicine in London. That made her England's first official female doctor.

She was not interested in the medical field before. She did not like seeing blood and the one time her teacher showed the students in school a bull's eyeball to show how eyes worked totally repulsed her. She started as a teacher and was planning to be a teacher all her life as most women were teachers or governess in the 1800s but a friend who had cancer changed her mind. The friend told her that if she had a female doctor, she would be more comfortable. Elizabeth thought about this for a long time and decided she would become a doctor. She thought that other women probably had the same experience as her friend. And that's how Elizabeth Blackwell became the first female doctor in the United States.

Her science journey began when Elizabeth Blackwell was born on February 3, 1821, in Bristol, England. She was the third of the nine children of Samuel Blackwell, a sugar refiner, and his wife Hannah Lane Blackwell. The family was relatively wealthy and the children had tutors for their schooling. The Blackwells believed all children, male and female, should get an education. The children were



aware that the family's morals (which were against slavery) disagreed with their means of livelihood: their sugar refinery depended on sugarcane that had been harvested by

forced labor through slavery. Because of their beliefs against slavery, the children decided to give up eating sugar.

A fire in 1828 destroyed the sugar refinery. Samuel Blackwell decided not to rebuild the refinery. There was growing unrest in England about too few people having the right to vote. There was also an outbreak of cholera. In August 1832, the family sailed to the United States in hopes of starting a new life. Samuel Blackwell started a sugar refinery in New York. Elizabeth attended school and became more active in the antislavery movement.

In 1838, the family moved again this time to Cincinnati, Ohio. After the move, Samuel Blackwell grew ill with fever and died on August 17, 1838. With no source of income, Elizabeth and her two older sisters Anna and Marian, opened a boarding school for young women called "Blackwell School for Young Ladies".

In 1842, the Blackwell sisters closed their boarding school, but Elizabeth continued teaching some of the students privately. In 1844, she got a job offer to run a school

in Henderson, Kentucky. What a culture shock for her! Kentucky was tobacco-growing country and most of the work was done by slaves. For an abolitionist, it was a hard experience! She tried to teach the children of slaves, but it turned out that that was illegal! Black people were not allowed to go to school! So, she taught them in secret. She ran the small school for a short time. The injustice of slavery weighed heavily on her. She resigned after one term of teaching.

Elizabeth returned to Ohio and studied German, music, and other subjects on her own. During this time one of her friends, Mary Donaldson, was dying of cancer. When she went to visit her, Mary told Elizabeth that she probably would have been more comfortable if her doctor were a woman. She suggested that Elizabeth study medicine to help other women like her. Elizabeth took her friend's advice to heart. Even though the thought of dealing with blood and body parts disgusted her, she could not forget the words of her friend: "I would have been more comfortable if I had had a female doctor". So, Elizabeth made up her mind to be a doctor. But how? No medical schools would accept a woman. She also did not have the \$3000 needed to go to medical school!

She applied for a teaching job in Asheville, North Carolina. She could save enough money in two years. She taught at a school for girls. Here, she also secretly taught a class for children of slaves.

In 1847, she moved to Philadelphia where she hoped to be admitted to one of the four medical schools in the city. But it was not that easy! All four schools rejected her. She applied at other schools, 29 in all, and all but one rejected her. Geneva Medical School in New York accepted her! The Dean and the faculty could not decide what to do when they received her application, so they asked the 150 male students. They all voted yes as a joke, because they didn't really think a woman would have the nerve to attend a medical school. First, they



did not think women had the intelligence needed to apply to medical school. It was such an absurd idea! Even the friends of Elizabeth thought it was a mistake! Women could not be doctors! But Elizabeth was determined to prove them wrong!

On November 7, 1847, Elizabeth made history by becoming the first woman to attend a medical school! When they first saw her, the townspeople of Geneva were horrified and would not walk on the same side of the street as her. Her male classmates could not believe it when they saw her enter the classroom! Even her professors had doubts! What would she do when they had to dissect the body of a male subject? But she persevered and graduated first in her class! On January 23, 1849, she received her medical degree. During the graduation ceremony, the speaker, Dr. Charles Lee, pointed out this big achievement, that Elizabeth Blackwell had just become the first woman in the United States to receive a medical degree! The audience erupted in applause! Her achievement opened the doors to other women -including her younger sister Emily Blackwell who became the third woman in the US to receive a medical degree. Emily earned her medical degree at the Medical College of Cleveland, Ohio in 1854.

In 1848, a group of diseases called typhus or typhoid fever was a big problem in the world. Elizabeth was interested in finding a treatment for this disease. Elizabeth chose to do an in-depth study of typhus for her thesis, a graduation requirement for all students. She focused on how the disease spread and how the poor were at the greatest risk due to living in unsanitary conditions. Her thesis earned praises at the National Medical Convention held in Boston, Massachusetts. After she graduated from medical school in 1849, her thesis on typhus was published in the *Buffalo Medical Journal and Monthly Review*.

After graduation, Elizabeth could not find a job. No one would hire a woman doctor. She decided to go to Europe to practice as a doctor at a hospital and continue learning. Hospitals refused to hire her because she was a woman. When she was finally hired at La Martenite - a hospital for women giving birth - in Paris, France, they did not accept her as a doctor. She became a student midwife. Despite this, she was thankful for the hands-on training she received at La Martinete.

In November 1849, while treating a baby with an eye infection, Elizabeth used a syringe to draw infected liquid from the baby's eye and some of the fluid splattered

on Elizabeth's left eye. By the evening, her eye was swollen and infected. A doctor tried to burn the infection away with heat. Another doctor applied leeches to suck blood and fluid from the infected eye. The infection grew worse and the infection left her blind in her left eye. Surgeons removed her infected eye. Her hopes of becoming a surgeon one day faded. For the rest of her life, she had a glass eye.

After she recovered, she studied in London. She met Florence Nightingale who wanted to open a school of nursing for women. Elizabeth realized that sexism in London was just as bad or worse than in the United States. She returned to the US in 1851 and went to New York to begin her own practice.

In New York, she applied to the women's department of a medical clinic, called a dispensary. But the clinic did not accept her. They wouldn't hire a female doctor.

She decided to form her own clinic, the New York Dispensary for Poor Women and Children. This Dispensary still exists and is now called New York Downtown Hospital.



She planned to hire female doctors and give them opportunities. Elizabeth offered her services for free. Several members of the Quakers funded the clinic.

In 1854, Elizabeth adopted a seven year old Irish orphan, Katherine "Kitty" Barry. Elizabeth was feeling isolated and lonely. She needed more than just her career. She and Kitty developed a close bond and Kitty remained by Elizabeth's side into adulthood.

Elizabeth's younger sister, Emily Blackwell, was the third woman to earn a



medical degree in the United States. Emily tried to enroll at Geneva Medical School, but they refused to accept women after Elizabeth graduated, even though Elizabeth had graduated at the top of her class. Emily received her medical degree from Western Reserve University. Emily helped at the New York Infirmary, a small hospital that Elizabeth opened on May 12, 1857.

During the Civil War (1861-1865) Elizabeth and her sister Emily trained nurses to serve in the Union Army hospitals. They worked with Dorothea Dix, the Superintendent of Female

Nurses. Dorothea was a famous reformer who helped found 32 mental hospitals, 14 schools for people with special needs, a school for the blind, and many training schools for nurses. Elizabeth saw this as an opportunity for women health professionals to gain acceptance and be paid while giving necessary care to the soldiers. But Dorothea Dix said that women should volunteer to provide medical care to the soldiers as an extension of a woman's duty to care for home and family. So, the government adopted Dorothea's idea because it was less expensive and did not upset gender roles. Elizabeth was sidelined but kept helping the Union.

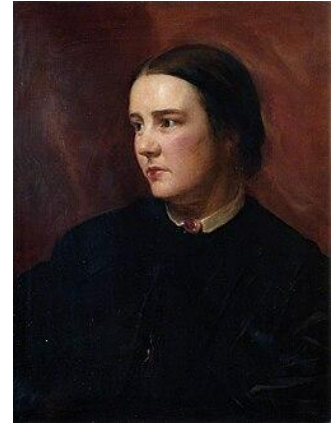
In 1868, determined to help other women become doctors, Elizabeth opened the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. The college was one of the first schools in the United States to require extended training. The college is now part of Weill Cornell Medicine.

Elizabeth has begun mentoring Marie Zakrsewka, a Polish woman pursuing a medical degree. Marie told Elizabeth that she was once a chief midwife in Europe. She left Germany to find a job in America. In 1857, Marie and Emily Blackwell both obtained their medical degrees at Western Reserve University.

An old friend came to visit Elizabeth and asked her to go to England where there are no women doctors. Elizabeth sailed to England in 1869 and left the hospital in the

care of Marie and Emily. In 1874, she and Sophia Jex-Blake started the London School of Medicine for Women. Elizabeth became a professor and chair of the gynecology department. She stayed at the school until her retirement in 1907.

Elizabeth also helped form the British National Health Society. It focused on teaching people ways to prevent the spread of diseases. The Society's motto was that prevention is better than a cure.



After her retirement, Elizabeth became one of the leaders of the Christian Socialist Movement. The group believed in justice, mercy, and the theory that everyone was connected. Elizabeth argued that science and religion were not inconsistent with each other. She believed that religious morals played a key role in medicine.

In 1895, she published her autobiography, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women*. The book discussed her life and pursuit of a medical degree. She hoped that in the future men and women would work as equals. She spent much of her time traveling, taking trips to Scotland and the United States.

On May 31, 1910, she died of a stroke in Hastings, England. Her ashes were buried in Kilmium, Scotland.

HER LEGACY

Elizabeth Blackwell will always be known as the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States and the first female doctor.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges is the current name of Geneva College, the founding institution of Geneva Medical College. Since 1958, Hobart and William Smith Colleges have presented the Elizabeth Blackwell Award to women who have demonstrated “outstanding service to humankind”.

The State University of New York Upstate Medical University took over Geneva Medical College in 1871 and was acquired in 1950 by the State University of New York. Both Hobart and William Smith Colleges and the State University of New York consider Elizabeth Blackwell as their distinguished alumna.

Since 1849, the American Medical Women's Association has awarded the Elizabeth Blackwell Medal annually to a female physician.

The New York Infirmary still exists today as the New York Downtown Hospital.

She founded the Women's Medical College of New York Infirmary. It is now part of Weill Cornell Medicine.

Elizabeth Blackwell is also the first woman on the Medical Register of the General Medical Council for the United Kingdom.

She co-founded the London School of Medicine for Women.

She helped form the British National Health Society.

In 1973, she was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

In 2013, the University of Bristol established the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute for Health Research.

On February 3, 2016, National Women Physicians Day was declared a National Holiday.

On February 3, 2018 Google honored her with a doodle in celebration of her 197th birthday.



In May 2018, a commemorative plaque was unveiled at the former location of the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children.

Some videos about the life of Elizabeth Blackwell:

<https://www.nyhistory.org/educational-video/elizabeth-blackwell-trailblazer-for-women-in-medicine>

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1468774501333188>

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/video/elizabeth-blackwell-lesson-for-kids-biography-facts.html>

In 1974, Elizabeth was commemorated on a U.S. postage stamp designed by Joseph Stanley Kozlowski, an American portrait and watercolor artist.



In 2010, a plaque was installed in the Blackwell's family home in Bristol, England.



When Elizabeth died in 1910, there were 7,399 women doctors in America. In 2004, of the 885,000 physicians in the United States, 236,000 were women. Women account for roughly 54.6 % to 55% of the medical students today.

HER SCIENCE JOURNEY

1821 - Elizabeth Blackwell was born in Bristol, England on February 3

1828 - A fire destroyed the sugar refinery of Elizabeth's father

1832 - The Blackwell Family moved to the United States and settled in New York

1838 - Elizabeth's father, Samuel Blackwell, died after the family moved to Cincinnati, Ohio

- Elizabeth and her two older sisters opened a boarding school for girls to help the family survive after the death of her father

1842 - The Blackwell sisters closed their boarding school

1844 - Elizabeth traveled to Kentucky to run a school

1847 - Elizabeth was accepted at Geneva Medical College

1848 - She completed her thesis on typhus disease

1849 - Elizabeth becomes the first woman to earn a medical degree in the United States

- Her thesis on typhus was published in the *Buffalo Medical Journal and Monthly Review*.
- She went to Europe to do more studies and training because she could not find a job as a doctor after graduation
- Worked as a student midwife at La Martinete Hospital in Paris, France. It was there that her eye got infected. She wore a glass left eye until she died

1854 - Opened the New York Dispensary for Women and Children

- Adopted an orphan, Kitty Barry

1861 - She and her sister Emily trained nurses for the Union Army during the American Civil War

1869 - Elizabeth moved to England and helped open the London School of Medicine for Women

1895 - Publishes her autobiography *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession for Women*

1907 - Retires from the London School of Medicine for Women

1910 - Elizabeth dies after suffering a stroke

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https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/changing-the-face-of-medicine/physicians/biography_elizabeth_blackwell.html

<https://home.nuhw.org/2025/02/19/dr-elizabeth-blackwell/>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Blackwell>